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22nd CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT, NEW YORK

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 2, 2003

HINCHEY INTRODUCES RESOLUTION IN SUPPORT OF MEDIA DIVERSITY

WASHINGTON - U.S. Representative Maurice Hinchey (NY-22) on Thursday introduced a resolution (H. Res. 218) that would express the sense of the House of Representatives that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should not revise its media ownership rules without extensive review and public scrutiny. FCC Chairman Michael Powell has announced that on June 2, the commission will vote on whether to relax the rules without any public review or comment.

"The public owns the airwaves," Hinchey said. "It follows that the debate over who may use those airwaves should be held in public, not cloaked in secrecy. Yet, only one official FCC briefing has been held on this matter. Chairman Powell has called this process 'unprecedented.' Unfortunately it will result in an unprecedented disservice to the American public."

It has become clear that Powell intends to push the FCC to revise its rules in a way that would make it possible for fewer owners to control the information distribution system in the United States. This would continue a process of erosion that began in the early 1980s. The result has been a severe decline in independence among media owners. Since 1975, two-thirds of America's independent newspapers have disappeared, and nearly three-quarters of the country's media markets have only one local daily newspaper. One-third of the nation's independent TV stations have vanished in the last 27 years. Eighty percent of the radio audience is now tuned to broadcasts controlled by just three corporations. Commensurate with this consolidation of ownership has been a decline in coverage of local news and events, particularly in rural communities, and a decline in the presentation of divergent viewpoints.

The FCC has held just one public briefing on its plans and has not allowed for public comment. Despite numerous calls for a more open process from members of both parties in the House and Senate, the FCC is proceeding on its current course. Hinchey's resolution, which is supported by Consumers' Union, the Communications Workers of America, the Newspaper Guild and the Media Access Project, calls on the FCC to examine and inform the public of the consequences that can be expected if the current rules are weakened. It also calls on the commission to allow for extensive public review and comment on any proposed changes to media ownership rules before issuing a final rule.

"The public needs to have the opportunity to fully understand what's happening to the communication media in our nation," Hinchey added. "So far, most of this has been below the radar. I believe that's being done intentionally because the proponents of the changes know that public scrutiny will result in public opposition. It is unconscionable to enact the proposed changes without fully involving the American people in the process."